Why did you decide to report about the conflict and when did you start?

It was not a decision, when we started to demonstrate against the regime then we had to flee and move closer to Turkey. I was working as headmaster at that time. We crossed the border between Turkey and Syria, as the Regime Army was still very close to the area where we were. It was at that time that I started to work with NGOs and organizations, helping them to tell what was happening in the area where I used to live. That’s when I started to work and collaborate with journalists from different news agencies: CNN Plus 24, BBC. I also made some interviews as I was the only one who could speak English in the area at that time. While I was in Turkey, I had to stay in the refugee camp, but I also wanted to report about “our revolution”, so I started to collaborate with journalists without even being paid, because I was doing it for the Syrians. However, after a few years, I needed money, so I begun to work with journalists more often. I used to take photos and film inside the camp, doing some interviews to the people coming into the camp from Syria and also working as translator for some journalists. After a few time I started to work for Sky News English and I kept collaborating with them. It was not my decision to report about the war. I did not study Media or communication, I worked as English teacher and Headmaster for many years, but now collaborating with journalists and reporting stories is my job.

Was reporting your initial idea?

After what we saw during the demonstrations in Latakia, Homs and other cities we were not able to remain silent. The start of Arab Spring motivated us to bring our contribution to freedom. The people had something inside and they want to fight for freedom in their own way. I had nothing in mind when it starteed. Then the situation escalated and we had to leave everything behind, people died and the war started. The initial idea was to contribute to the revolution, then we found ourselves in a warzone.

How did you prepare yourself for your new job?

Journalists themselves wanted to cross the border, but they needed trustworthy people to go with them. I was one of these people. I started to help them, I created a net of contacts inside Syria and we started to cross near Idlib and we “joined in” with a group of the FSA to report about their activity. This was just the beginning. I came back into Syria with more and more journalists, working alongside them in different ways. Once inside Syria I had to work with people I knew and I trusted, because when we started to report about not only the situation near the border, but also in the interior, we had to go through different Regime Army’s checkpoints.

Do you identify yourself as a journalist?

I have never thought about being a journalist. Thanks to the NGOs I was introduced to journalists and I started to work with them and learn from them. They were looking for people who could trust to accompany them. I started like that and then it became a full-time job. I built relations and a net of contacts and sources with whom I could work. However, I was very careful to work with Syrian journalists, also because some of them could be working for the regime. At the beginning there was no need for me to cover stories, as I was just accompanying journalists in Syria, because I was very busy. Then I started to work with them. I covered some stories for The Times and other news agencies, I also shared and published them on my Facebook page, as at that time it was the main mean through which “us” activists could publish stories. After that, my collaboration with news agencies gradually grew. They used to send me requests on Facebook, asking to follow up my stories with their own reporters. I also used to post photos and videos about the situation inside Syria (Aleppo, Rakka, Idlib). However, the major stories I covered were the ones I reported about working with other journalists and not on my own.

So you wrote stories but also filmed and took photos?

Yes of course, I did it, but I was not a journalist. I basically had the possibility to travel into Syria with other journalists and I took advantage of this opportunity. Especially before the appearance of the IS, when it was safer to get into Syria.

How did the situation change with the IS?

At the beginning we were very careful. It was difficult to understand whether they wanted journalists around to report, or just to kidnap them. I got contacts of some people who were close to them, at the beginning of the IS it was safer to report about them, but then they started to kidnap reporters and it was not possible to get near them.

How did you decide who to work with and which people trust?

I also had to look for trustful people. I contacted several people and I compared them with each other, also talking to people I already knew, especially my old friends who I trusted. They also provided me with information about other contacts I could trust, even from areas of which I had not knowledge at all. Working with people you trust is fundamental. It is like a chain and you have to analyze and talk to all the people who are part of it. Meeting people in person is fundamental to decide if it is possible to work with them.

How did you decide whether a person was reliable or not? Did you have any criteria?

I relied on contacts mainly. I always made sure to meet them in person, I talked with them about the situation in the area and what was going on. I also talked about possible stories that was possible to cover in the area. I had to be sure that he knew the area and the people very well, then I would talk to other people in the area that my first contact suggested.

What about news stories? Did journalists who contacted you already had a story to report, or did you provide them with one?

At the beginning, the closure of the border between Turkey and Syria was a news itself, so journalists wanted to report it. We covered a lot of stories about the border, refugees and life in refugees camps. We talked with FSA, with civilians and people leaving their houses. Sometimes journalists would come to me asking if I could help them cover a particular story, I always advised them if it was possible or not to cover it. I remember an Indian journalist who wanted to go to the frontline and film FSA fighting. He had a story in mind but it was not true, it was not possible to film a story that was not real. I told him that we had to look at the truth and we only spent 3 days n Syria then I convinced him to get back. He asked me to film FSA army without asking them for permission. This was dangerous and disrespectful to them, so we had to finish our journey and get back to Turkey, as I did not want to work with him anymore.

Did you publish some stories on the Facebok page?

I took photos and wrote short pieces about people living the war. I respected the journalists I was with, so I had to film for them and not for myself. I published some stories while I was in the camp, or while we were travelling around Syria with other journalists, but I always published news and stories which were not related to the main stories the journalists I was with wanted to cover. I usually took photos and wrote a brief piece about it, just to give the public a hint about what was going on.

Did you just work with journalists from Western news agencies or did you also work with journalists from Arab or Middle East news agencies?

I worked with both of them. I mainly collaborated with Sky News, but also with Al-Jazeera and Al- Arabia. I did not like to work with any Arabic news agencies, as they had certain point of view about the Syrian conflict, they were really influenced by their governments, they would leave the revolution out of their coverage. I always wanted to report the truth. Arabic news agencies usually called all the Syrians radilcals and extremists, but this Is not true. Many people were just fighting the regime.

Would you call yourself an activist?

It is not a problem the name they call me. I do not care. I just wanted to do my job and report about the war.

Working with western news agencies did you have any standards or editorial guidelines to follow?

They had some rigid protocols about getting involved with the people around us. I remember one time, we were filming and reporting from an area near the city where I used to live and two FSA members started to fight. I intervened as I personally knew them, they were my students, and I stopped the fight. I left the journalists I was with and when I got back, they told me that I had to respect the word “press” printed on my chest, but I could not resist to intervene in that moment, I still saw these young boys as my students. Sometimes it is difficult to divide your job from your life. Especially in a situation like Syria.

What do you think about objectivity?

I respect journalist who respect the stories and try to report the story as it is. I think that most of the people I worked with wanted to report reality objectively. I really enjoyed working with them. I was once in Idlib with a Norwegian journalist and he wanted to interview people there. One of the questions was whether there was a Al-Nousra military base in the area, or not. At the beginning civilians were just saying that there were just civilians in the area, however one of the fixers who were with us asked them to tell the truth and they listened to him and told us the whole story. It is very important to have people that know the area with you, as this can also help journalists to report a story as it is, helping them to report objectively what is going on.

Do you think that it is possible to have a neutral point of view about a story?

It is not easy and sometimes it is impossible. Our main goal was to report the story, but at the same time the most important thing was our safety. You have to merge with the environment as much as possible, trying to understand traditions and the cultural background of the country you are reporting from. I remember when a female journalist reporting from Idlib took off her veil. All the people gathered around her, they were both curious and angry, they forget about the story she was reporting and many of them were not interested in talking with her. It is important to understand this point, also because if you understand and you are interested in the culture of the country, you might be able to get interesting stories which reflect reality.

Is it possible for a journalist to get too involved in the situation he is reporting about and lose his objective point of view?

People in Syria always had to know who we were. It is impossible to get in Syria without introducing ourselves. They knew people who were accompanying us. It is inevitable, working with people from the area and not get involved in the situation. When we went to film Al-Nousra and we had to get there with people who were part of this group, and of course their point of view prevailed on others frames. However, even if you try to be objective, in some situations you indirectly influenced by the environment you find yourself in.

Why did you want to work with journalists, beside money?

Before the war many things happened in Syria, but nobody reported about it. With the conflict it was possible for everyone to see what was happening. I wanted to report about the violations perpetrated by Russia and the regime, targeting public areas, markets, hospitals, schools. I wanted to tell the story of people living the war inside Syria and show their suffering, but at the same time I wanted to show who was responsible for this.

Do you still keep in touch with sources and people inside Syria?

I am still working with journalists, less than before. I am still doing some stories and working with Skynews. At this time I am still working on stories about Syria and Syrian refugees, trying to link the Syrian situation to the conflict in Ukraine. I still have contacts in Syria, I keep in touch with them. I like my job as a reporter, it is easier for me to work as a reporter, because of the experience I gained, however I have projects about the future, getting my old job back and return to Syria when the situation stabilizes.